



White Paper  
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# Teaching leaders to coach

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*The literature relating to managerial coaching is grounded in the experience of specialist and executive coaches; there is scant research about the extent to which the same models and behaviours are appropriate for line managers.*

Valerie Anderson

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Most coaching skills programs have little sustainable impact on behaviours in the workplace. Here's why.

## 1. Coaching as a leader is different

Our research tells us that managerial coaching is different to external coaching in at least four respects. *First*, leader/coaches don't get to choose who they coach. No 'chemistry checks', no calling off an assignment if it isn't going well. Leader/coaches need awesome relationship skills. *Second*, leader/coaches have to be great at giving feedback. Some external coaches get away with just asking questions. Leaders don't. *Third*, leader/coaches may need to have three different types of conversation in the same conversation. External coaches don't need to be so adaptable. *Fourth*, team leaders must coach teams. Many external coaches limit their practice to working with individuals. Coaching as a leader is different, and in many ways more difficult. Coaching skills programs must reflect what is required of a leader/coach.

## 2. What works for Woolworths may not work for Westpac

Different organizations have different cultures, different leadership models, and different strategies. Accordingly, how different organizations define coaching will be different.

## 3. Putting theory into practice

Many programs end at the end of the workshop. When that's the case, don't expect behaviours to change. It sometimes takes weeks for people to revisit what they've learned, by which time they've forgotten most of it anyway. People need support in implementing new behaviours.

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#### **4. Leadership is relational**

The traditional mantra of organisational development (OD) experts is that you can change organisations one person at a time. Modern OD theory suggests otherwise. If we want to change the behaviour of our leaders then we need to pay attention to the functioning of the 'system' and intervene accordingly.

The following design principles will help you build more effective development programs.

##### **1. Be purposeful**

Why should the leaders of your organisation want to become better coaches? What's the objective? Do you want your leaders to become more collaborative? Or do you want to accelerate the development of your leaders? Or is it because the organisation wants to become more innovative? Being purposeful helps you to determine measures of success and helps you to think about how best to define coaching with reference to the challenges facing your organisation.

##### **2. Make experience your religion**

People learn by doing stuff, then reflecting on that doing. I attended a leadership program a few years ago, as a coach. The Program Director insisted on running the program from 0830 to 2030 every day. His rationale was that the organization was paying lots of money for the participants to be there, and as leaders they should be used to working long hours. People got tired and struggled to keep up with an unrelenting torrent of theory and models. If this is what your coaching program is like, don't expect sustainable behavioural change. Make your programs experiential. After a workshop, give people the opportunity to put models into practice. Stagger your programs over the course of six months, or a year. By staggering your program, people have the opportunity to regather and to compare experiences.

##### **3. Make room for meaning-making**

If you present a seven-step model on how to coach, or how to manage a difficult conversation, or whatever; people don't just go and implement the model next day. Leaders intuitively understand the limitations of models. They know that models simplify, they know that every situation is different, they have their own values and sense of how they want to behave. All of this requires not just experience, but the opportunity to make sense of that

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experience, preferably with people in the same boat. Over the last few years we've conducted research into leadership programs that were regarded as successful and in which the facilitators were said to have done a great job. Participants still said that they learned more from their fellow participants than they did from the facilitators. This won't please those facilitators who put themselves on a pedestal called 'expert'. It will delight those who see themselves as guides or 'sherpas'<sup>i</sup> Contemporary theories of change recognise that change emerges from dialogue. If we want our leaders to develop therefore, we need to create ongoing forums in which they have opportunities to engage in dialogue to make meaning.

#### **4. Engage the whole system**

The traditional approach to leadership development is to focus on developing leaders one by one. If you can enhance the effectiveness of each individual leader, so the theory goes, then you will succeed in enhancing the capability of the organization as a whole. This apparently sensible strategy is unlikely to work because leadership really isn't an individual sport<sup>ii</sup>. We don't make sense of stuff by ourselves; meaning making is social.

*Mandy went on a two-day coaching workshop where she was told that to become a better coach you needed to make time to listen to others' points of view. At first, she was doubtful. In her part of the organization leaders were expected to know all the answers. After talking to fellow participants however, she was persuaded. She went back to her division ready to listen more. Her division was about to engage in a major restructure, and at her first team meeting back in the business, she suggested that the team needed to be more collaborative. They needed to listen more and encourage others to engage. Her colleagues took no notice however, suggesting she was being naïve. One responsibility of a leader, they told her, is to be clear and decisive. To hesitate is to be seen as weak. Mandy didn't like being labelled weak and told herself the facilitators must have got it wrong.*

The meaty bit of a coaching skills programs begins at the point at which the leader steps back into the workplace. In many organisations leaders are expected to take responsibility for their own learning, but most leaders need support. If, when I try out a new behaviour, it doesn't go well, I need someone to sit down and talk to, to help me work out what to do next, someone who I trust. The world is more complex than we give it credit for, and to hold up our hands and leave our leaders to work it all out for themselves doesn't work.

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Our leaders operate in a system So, what are some concrete things we can do to support change in the system? Some of the following options have already been mentioned:

- Engage key stakeholders in advance as to the purpose of the program.
- Provide ongoing forums for leaders to continue learning with each other and supporting each other.
- If you like the idea of 'buddy systems' - empower participants to choose their own buddies and to experiment with effective ways of working with each other.
- Invite senior leaders to participate in programs alongside more junior leaders.
- Ask senior leaders to present sections of the program.
- Invite senior leaders to come and talk with participants at the beginning and end of programs – try and turn this into dialogue rather than having a leader come in, talk for 10 minutes, then disappear.
- Hold separate workshops for line managers, familiarizing them with content and inviting them to support each other in supporting participant's learnings.
- Talk to participants on an ongoing basis. Find out what's happening etc ... (neat segway to point 5!)

## **5. Evaluate, evaluate, evaluate (then evaluate)**

Organizations spend lots of money on development but very little on evaluating the impact of programs. Evaluation is often limited to asking participants how they experienced the workshop. We don't dismiss the value of 'happy sheets'. Seeking to understand how participants experience a program is useful - the feedback will help you improve the workshop. But if you are serious about developing the collective capacity of your organization to coach, then these insights are insufficient because they tell you nothing about the functioning of the broader system. If you're proposing to spend a lot of resource on a coaching skills program then make sure you allocate resources to evaluating the impact of the program on the system. This assumes that the purpose of your intervention is more ambitious than 'give the participants a fun two days'. If the purpose of your intervention includes, for example, 'enhance the capability of leaders to coach' then you *must* explore how people behave once they are back in the workplace. Aspects of a good evaluation strategy include:

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*Getting to grips with the question is likely to take you beyond workshops and into the fabric and functioning of your organization as a whole.*

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- A clear focus on the original purpose of the program.
- A commitment to studying the impact of the program over a long period of time (e.g. 12 months).
- Interviews with multiple stakeholders, not only program participants, but other people in the organization who you hope will be positively impacted by participant behaviours.

Such a strategy will provide you with insights as to what needs to change in the broader system if the program is to achieve its purpose.

## **6. N-n-n-n—n-never stop! <sup>iii</sup>**

Learning how to cultivate more effective coaching behaviours in your organization is a never-ending journey. Senior leaders come and go. New staff join. Old staff leave. Organisations sell bits of themselves and buy new bits. Competitors do the unexpected. Economies shrink and grow. How will you keep the conversation going? Getting to grips with the question is likely to take you into an even more systemic space, beyond workshops and into the fabric and functioning of your organization as a whole. Good luck!

### ***Paul Lawrence***

Principal, Centre for Coaching in Organisations

[Paul@ccorgs.com.au](mailto:Paul@ccorgs.com.au)

For more information, ask Paul for a copy of:

‘Managerial Coaching - a Literature Review’ in: *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring* 15(2), 43-69.

### ***Notes & Acknowledgments***

- Rowland, D. (2016). Why Leadership Development Isn’t Developing Leaders. *Harvard Business Review*, October 14<sup>th</sup>
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- Echo & the Bunnymen (1983). *Never Stop*. London: Korova/WEA